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Uruguay's Boutique Wineries Find the World Stage



Horacio Paone for The New York Times

Paula Pivel, at Alto de la Ballena, the winery she and her husband started in 2000 near Punta del Este.

By PAOLA SINGER
Published: April 19, 2009

AFTER several wrong turns through desolate dirt roads, I finally saw Carlos Pizzorno waving at me from the entrance of his vineyard. He is an affable man with wind-worn skin and rough hands, the result of tending personally to the vines. While touring the 50-acre estate, we stopped before two hand-cranked corking machines from the early 1900s, a quaint example of Mr. Pizzorno's painstaking craftsmanship. Inside the cellar, his 2004 blend of tannat, [cabernet sauvignon](#), [merlot](#) and petit verdot had been aging in bottle for three years. "It will be released when the time is right," he said. "These [wines](#) have my family name and I can't let it down."

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winemaking neighbors, [Argentina](#) and [Chile](#), Uruguay lags far behind in recognition. But

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Canelones, Uruguay

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Horacio Paone for The New York Times
A part of the 37 acres of vineyards at the Viñedo de los Vientos winery.

thanks to a group of ambitious boutique [wineries](#), it is slowly winning over critics and connoisseurs.

"I was favorably impressed by what they are doing," said Evan Goldstein, a [San Francisco](#) master sommelier who recently visited [Uruguay](#). "It's an industry that candidly wants to get outside, and what's intrinsically exciting is that it's all family-owned, which is a rarity in this business."

Uruguay's temperate climate is suited for wine growing, with warm summers, cool winters and ocean breezes that flow freely through low hills and plains. The conditions are similar to those of [France's Bordeaux](#) region.

For most of the 20th century, the country produced mainly unsophisticated table reds for local consumption. After a nationwide replanting of imported clone vines, which

began in the late '70s, the industry was finally able to focus on quality. In recent years, about 20 wineries began courting international markets with inventive blends and a signature red called tannat.

Tannat grapes, originally from the southwest of France, were first planted in Uruguay in 1870 by a Basque immigrant. The vines flourished, yielding a suppler taste than their highly astringent (because of high tannin levels) European counterparts.

Having a flagship varietal can be an asset — a case in point is malbec in Argentina — and local growers are hoping to use this grape as their passport to distinction. During my visit in January, winemakers talked about developing tannats that adapt better to global palates (drinkers abroad may find the wine too rustic or earthy), about crafting unique blends, and about diversifying their portfolios with popular grapes.

This is the strategy at Pizzorno ([www.pizzornowines.com](#)). When Carlos, grandson of the winery founder Don Próspero José Pizzorno, took over the business in 1983, quality and marketability became paramount. He planted new clones of sauvignon blanc, [chardonnay](#), [pinot noir](#), petit verdot, tannat and other varieties, enlisting the help of a [New Zealand](#)-born consultant. Today, 60 percent of his wine is sold abroad.

Pizzorno's tasting room is notably austere, but the wines are encouragingly approachable. We tried a fruity 2008 sauvignon blanc, a peppery 2007 [pinot noir](#) with berry aromas, and a brut nature sparkling wine that, to a [Champagne](#) lover with no formal training, tasted superbly crisp and refreshing. I took home a bottle for a mere \$10.

[Viñedo de los Vientos](#) ([www.vinedodelosvientos.com](#)) is another small winery with big ideas. The owner, Pablo Fallabrino, inherited the property in 1995, when he was just 21. He has surfer looks and a hang-loose attitude, and is considered somewhat of an iconoclast. "I like to combine techniques, to do weird things," he said. One of Mr. Fallabrino's concoctions is a ripasso de tannat, made using a traditional Italian method by which grapes are left to dry for one month under the sun, and the resulting raisins are

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used to referment a young wine. After 18 months in French oak, the outcome is a hearty, dry red with liqueur aromas.

During our walk through 37 acres of cabernet sauvignon, trebbiano, tannat, gewürztraminer, chardonnay and nebbiolo vines, Mr. Fallabrino talked about his sustainable approach to farming and his conviction that Uruguay needed to focus on a single foreign market. Since the first vintage, Mr. Fallabrino set his sights on the [United States](#) and now sells 90 percent of his 60,000 bottles in New York, [California](#) and other states.

Back at Viñedo de los Vientos's casual tasting room, Mariana Cerutti, Mr. Fallabrino's wife, prepared a shrimp and watercress salad paired with an aromatic white blend called Estival. Next, she brought a basket of unforgettable lamb empanadas, along with a medium-bodied tannat. The finale: handmade strawberry tartines and a sweet, chocolatey dessert wine (labeled Alcyone) that can best be described as addictive.

Most of Uruguay's 270 wineries are in Canelones, just north of Montevideo. Wine tourism started flourishing about five years ago, when 18 winemakers converged to create a trail called Los Caminos del Vino. Through their site, www.uruguaywinetours.com, visitors can schedule tastings and get help making travel arrangements.

[Alto de la Ballena](#) (www.altodelaballena.com) is perhaps the most scenic of these wineries. When Alvaro Lorenzo and his wife, Paula Pivel, decided to turn their love of wine into a business in 1998, they spent months searching for the right terroir, the French term that encompasses both soil and climate. In 2000 they found a rocky hillside plot eight miles from the sea, strategically located near [Punta del Este](#), summer retreat of [South America's](#) glitterati.

There is no tasting room in Alto de la Ballena; we sampled wines and local cheeses on a simple deck with unobstructed vistas of a faraway lagoon, grazing cattle and brushes of alamos and eucalyptuses. It's hard to mind a lack of infrastructure in a place like that. I tried a 2006 merlot, aged 12 months in French oak, that had wood and raisin aromas; a dry 2008 cabernet franc and tannat rosé, as well as an intriguing 2007 tannat-viognier.

Another required stop is [Bouza](#) (www.bodegabouza.com), frontrunner among Uruguay's new-generation wineries. Nine years ago, the Bouza family bought an abandoned winery with colonial-style facilities near Montevideo, where they planted 12 acres of albariño, [chardonnay](#), merlot and tannat vines (they also have a plot in Canelones). Bouza's oenologist, Eduardo Boido, practices a style of viticulture known as low-input, paired with a meticulous manual handling and selection of the fruit. The strategy has paid off. The winery's Tannat A6 Parcela Única (A6 is the name of the parcel where the wine comes from) was lauded by Jancis Robinson in The Financial Times and selected by the Wine Enthusiast as an editors' choice.

The food at the estate's restaurant — brick-walled and soberly decorated with leather sofas — is also ambitious. To start, I ordered an arugula and pear salad with Jabugo ham, paired with a dry, citrusy 2008 albariño. A rack of Hampshire Down lamb, raised on the property, seemed like the obvious second course. This flavorful dish married well with their aromatic 2006 Single Parcel Merlot B9, a big, robust wine. In the United States, it

sells for \$55.

The owner, Juan Bouza, is well aware of his — and Uruguay's — strengths and weaknesses. "This is not the place for a uniform, massive product," he said. "But for connoisseurs who have tried a lot of wines, we are very interesting."

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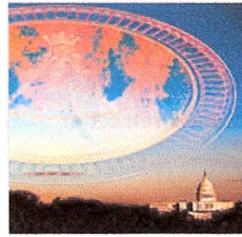


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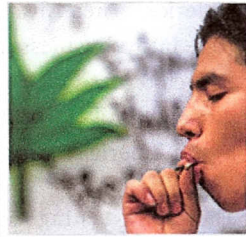
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